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First rain, then ice

BYLINE: Tony Plohetski and Andrea Ball AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF**SECTION:** NEWS; Pg. A01**LENGTH:** 1136 words

The winter weather wallop that dumped up to 6 inches of flooding rain Saturday will be followed by an arctic blast that will coat roads, trees and power lines in a treacherous layer of ice, perhaps as early as this afternoon, forecasters said.

Freezing rain could produce a half-inch to an inch of ice - a prediction that, if accurate, could create enough havoc to be remembered for years.

"If that materializes, it would be a worst-case scenario for the city of Austin," said Troy Kimmel, chief meteorologist for KVET and KASE radio. "It would be a major ice storm and could possibly be one of the worst storms we've seen in years."

Gov. Rick Perry activated 250 Texas National Guard troops Saturday night and authorized the use of 75 Humvees to help transportation officials and local authorities along the projected path of expected ice storms.

Perry spokesman Robert Black said the move was precautionary.

"Local communities are doing a good job of deploying assets and preparing for the worst," Black said. "The governor wants to make sure adequate backup is where it is needed."

Work teams, on standby, were preparing to remove downed trees and repair severed power lines.

Emergency crews, already strained by rescues and road closures from Saturday morning's flooding rains, are bracing for more. So were crowds of shoppers who descended on grocery stores to stockpile food, water, batteries and other emergency supplies as the weather outlook deteriorated.

Temperatures fell 30 degrees in the pre-dawn hours Saturday as a cold front slid over Central Texas, sparking a storm that dumped 6 3/4 inches of rain on Longhorn Dam on Town Lake, more than 5 inches on Buda and 4.67 inches on Manor.

Another blast of arctic air will arrive this afternoon, sending temperatures toward freezing by sunset, said Bob Rose, Lower Colorado River Authority meteorologist. Where that cold air collides with pockets of rain will determine who bears the brunt of the ice, he said.

"That would cause extremely hazardous travel, and I think it would also cause major problems with the snapping of tree limbs and power lines," Rose said.

Freezing rain, sleet and snow are expected to continue until Monday afternoon.

The first weather punch made its grand entrance early Saturday, bringing strong winds and pounding rain that closed numerous streets across Travis, Williamson and Hays counties.

Shoal Creek spilled over its banks in downtown Austin, and fast-rising Bouldin Creek prompted warnings for residents near South Seventh and Elizabeth streets of possible home flooding.

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Rescue crews searched without success for a woman who was reportedly swept into **Waller Creek** around Eighth Street.

In eastern Williamson County, fire crews evacuated five families from their homes in low-lying portions of southwest Taylor. About a foot of water was standing in the homes, fire Lt. Tim Davis said. No one was injured, but a dog died before it could be rescued, he said.

"These areas filled up pretty quickly, and people simply got flushed out," Davis said.

In Round Rock, southbound Interstate 35 was briefly closed at Old Settlers Boulevard after an accident involving a pickup pulling a trailer and an 18-wheeler. No injuries were reported.

Rescue workers in Austin were called to help at least a half-dozen motorists who entered low-lying areas and became stranded in water.

"It has been so intense today; we've had places that normally don't flood get high water," Austin Fire Department spokesman Matt Cox said.

Waller Creek rescue

By 8 a.m., 911 calls began arriving in rapid succession: two people trapped on a bridge at Third and Nueces streets, a motorist trapped on Cameron Road, an apparently empty car stuck in the water on FM 812.

Firefighter Homero Garcia was sleeping at the Austin fire station at Fifth and Trinity streets - it had been a busy night with routine medical and fire calls - when a dispatcher sent his crew to **Waller Creek**, a few blocks away.

Police officers, hearing shouts from the swollen creek, found a man clinging to foliage about 25 feet from shore. By the time Garcia arrived, the man's head was almost submerged and he appeared exhausted.

"He wasn't going to hold on for much longer," said Garcia, part of an Austin Fire Department water rescue team.

Rescuers threw ropes to the man, but he was too weak to grab hold. Then Garcia, in his first water rescue, decided to go in. He tied himself to a rope held by a fellow firefighter and then waded into the 50-degree, debris-filled creek.

"I reassured him I was going to get him out of there and that everything was going to be OK," Garcia said.

After being pulled ashore, the man told Garcia that he had jumped into the creek in an attempt to save a woman. The water, however, ripped the woman from his grasp, he said.

Emergency crews began searching **Waller Creek** and Town Lake but found no body. The woman is presumed dead, said Warren Hassinger, spokesman for Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services.

However, Austin firefighters are less sure, saying the woman could have escaped downstream. The rescued man was taken to Brackenridge Hospital to be treated for hypothermia.

Water takes over land

Streets ran like rivers, parks became ponds and quiet creeks rumbled in the unrelenting morning downpour.

Around downtown Austin, many homeless people abandoned their camps to seek shelter at the Salvation Army and the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless, leaving plastic tarps, clothing and empty beverage cans to wash away.

Some of the heaviest rain fell in East Austin, leaving areas looking like swamps.

Several residents of Oak Springs Villas, an apartment complex for low-income seniors, spent the afternoon musing over the heavily flooded fields of the nearby East Austin Soccer Club.

"See where those ducks are?" a man in thick, square glasses asked, pointing as the birds floated past a street sign. "That was land yesterday."

Nearby, Virginia Contreras' Tillery Street house was flooded on both sides. A partially submerged maroon Buick Skylark rested in her front yard.

Contreras was sleeping at 6:45 a.m. when, through the patter of rain on her roof, she heard a loud thud. Looking outside, she saw a car sitting in almost 3 feet of water in her yard.

"The guy didn't know what to do," she said. "He was yelling, 'Help! Help!' "

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Contreras said the driver and two female passengers were on their way to visit friends when the downpour started. The driver was trying to turn around in her driveway, missed and ended up getting stuck.

"It was raining cats and dogs," Contreras said.

"The man couldn't see what he was doing."

By late afternoon, the car was still there.

And the rain was still falling.

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Additional material from staff writers Patrick George and Andrea Lorenz.

(Illustration box: see microfilm)

Tips to deal with icy weather

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